



Enduring Fictions of Late Victorian Fantasy

Sir Arthur Evans and the Faience 'Goddesses' from Minoan Crete

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It was many years ago when as a teenager I first saw that dynamic little faience figurine that the world now calls 'the Snake Goddess', and I would assume that the majority of you know to which artefact I am referring. This lovely figurine of a woman holding snakes and dressed in flounced skirt has made a lasting impression on my memory, as it may have on your own. So you can imagine that it came as somewhat of a shock to me as an adult studying archaeology, when I discovered that the beautiful and intense face that had had such a compelling impact on my young imagination was, in fact, a modern reconstruction. Today I would like to introduce you to the story behind this Victorian tale of smoke and mirrors.

Archaeology in the late nineteenth century is a narrative replete with colourful individuals, some of whom were in fact dedicated pioneers of the archaeological discipline. It goes without saying that archaeology was still very much in its infancy and it is only natural that errors were made in this developmental period of early excavation. However, archaeological research has travelled a long way in the hundred years or so since the legendary

excavations of Heinrich Schliemann at Troy, Sir Flinders Petrie in Egypt, Sir Leonard Woolley in Mesopotamia and of course the excavation of Knossos in Crete by Sir Arthur Evans.

At least one would think that we had moved on and certainly subsequent archaeology has added a mass of data to the results of these early excavations in the intervening time. So why, in fact, does popular culture today still cling to tired clichés that actually stem from the publications of some early excavators? Today's case in point is the reconstruction and mythologising of Minoan Crete by the excavator of the site of Knossos, Sir Arthur Evans. I hazard that if you were to Google search the word Knossos at this very instant (or get in the car and actually make an effort to rummage around in a library), your search would bring up an astonishing volume of images that stem directly from Arthur Evans' reconstructions of Cretan culture and not from accurate or necessarily recent archaeological research on the Minoans.

With this premise borne in mind, I propose to examine the excavation of the site of Knossos by Evans and the enduring impact

his 'vision' of Minoan society has had on both public and professional perceptions of ancient Crete. In discussing this I shall focus upon that extraordinary group of artefacts which also happen to be the poster girls for this ancient culture: the faience 'snake goddess' figurines from the Temple Repositories of Knossos.

Minoan Crete

Before moving on to the topic, I shall first provide a brief sketch of the context with which we are dealing. The Minoan civilisation flourished for approximately 1800 years on the Aegean island of Crete in the eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age (ca. 3000-1100 BCE). At its peak, in the Palatial Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1950-1625 BCE), the Cretan culture produced a vast volume of naturalistic and beautiful representational art and architecture that is of equal status and quality to any of its neighbours in the Near East. Unlike the Near East, however, the study of Minoan culture is hampered by our inability to decipher the Minoan written script, Linear A, which means that in order to understand the nature of Cretan society we must instead draw inferences from the material and artistic record.

This flaw has in some way contributed to the evolution of assumptions regarding the nature of Minoan culture which have been difficult for academia to dislodge. The most ubiquitous of these is that because their iconography abounds with images of the natural world that the Minoans must have been egalitarian pacifists. Another is that because female figures are common in Minoan iconography this indicates that their social structure must have been

matriarchal. Both of these myths have subsequently been dispelled by Aegean scholarship, but they do persevere in wider literature, and much responsibility for this may be laid at the feet of early twentieth century scholarship.

Knossos in Crete: the Labyrinth of King Minos

The archaeological site that resoundingly placed the Minoan culture on the world stage is the monumental palatial site of Knossos which lies on the northern central coast of Crete at Kefala near Heraklion. The excavations of the site of Knossos began in March 1900 under the supervision of the British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans after his personal purchase of the land in the previous year.

Evans had had little experience of excavating when he commenced this project, but he had previously, as was fitting to his upper middle class social background, attended Harrow, studied classics at the University of Oxford and travelled extensively throughout Europe, the Near East and Egypt with a short turn at unsanctioned digging in Greece. In addition to these qualifications, he held the position of curator of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford from 1884. He also had connections to several British museums and like all intellectuals of his generation, held strong Darwinian cultural evolutionary views, as well as the mandatory colonial and imperialist attitudes appropriate to gentlemen of this era.

These educated Victorian values coloured the way Evans approached all aspects of his excavations at Knossos, from the romantic and evocative naming of the Cretan culture,





This beautiful confection is an early twentieth century painting by the artist Piet de Jong depicting the 'queen's megaron', a smaller hall at Knossos in Crete. It is perhaps worth noting that while women were assigned a prominent role in Minoan society by Sir Arthur Evans, he still applied western social models for gender hierarchy to the architecture he found there. Credit: Evans 1921, The Palace of Minos 1.

Minoan, after the Cretan king Minos from classical mythology, and the naming of chambers within the site (queen's megaron, throne-room), to the literature he produced describing his interpretation of the finds. Evans was a man with a modern sensibility for media showmanship and regularly publicised the process of his excavations through the medium of the London papers. Here he generously employed references to classical myth and to Homeric prose, fabricating a persona for the Minoans based substantially on his own Victorian classically educated vision and that of his academic peers.

At the site Arthur Evans employed an immense team of craftspeople, engineers, architects, and artists with a view to preserve and 'reconstitute' the remains that they found. He instituted rigorous methods of excavation in order to optimise efficiency and employed a reward system with his teams. This entailed financial bonuses for the team which excavated its section of ground in the best time, placing emphasis on the speed rather than on accuracy. With these methods and with the aid of considerable financial resources, he was able to employ a massive crew of diggers and thus to clear most of the site within six seasons (1900-1905).



One of Arthur Evans' early twentieth century reconstructions of Minoan architecture from Knossos. Credit: Wiki Commons.



The Temple Repositories as they were in 1903. Credit: Evans 1921, The Palace of Minos 1.



Early twentieth century photograph of some of the partially restored artefacts from the Temple Repositories. It is possible to see where parts of the image have been modified. Credit: A. Evans 1921, The Palace of Minos 1.

Once they had cleared the site, Evans implemented large scale restorations of the fragile ruins, in a 'legitimate process of reconstitution' that 'must appeal to the historic sense of the most unimaginative' and this occupied him and his team of skilled architects, led by Christian Doll, for the next two decades. The restoration of the fragmentary frescos and artefacts was assigned to the Swiss artist Émile Gilliéron and his son, Émile fils, and to the Danish painter Halvor Bagge.

The Temple Repositories

In 1903, four years after commencing excavations at Knossos, Evans and his team unearthed the 'Temple Repositories' in a small chamber west of the central court.

They had previously excavated this chamber a year earlier, but renewed interest when they noticed unevenness in the pavement stones. Underneath these they found two stone lined cists, both filled with debris, a layer of burnt soil and covered by plaster.

In one of these cists, the 'East Repository', was a treasure trove of precious objects consisting of many fragments of faience: figurines, vessels with moulded designs, beads and moulded plaques of 'votive robes', suckling goats, cattle, flowers, leaves, shells, flying fish, fruit and figure of eight shields. In addition the cist contained stone libation bowls, a large quantity of coloured sea shells, clay administrative sealings, a clay tablet, ivory inlays, bone,

burnt maize and stag horns. All of which were placed under a jumble of soil, gold foil and some forty ceramic amphorae and jugs. These vessels were used to provide a date for the collection (Middle Minoan IIIB - Late Minoan IA, ca. 1700-1525 BCE).

This discovery was hailed by Evans 'for beauty and interest equalled and in some respects surpassed anything found during the whole course of the four seasons' excavations' (1903: 40). As an assemblage the material from these cists is actually quite unique, however, Evans' very public praise was also an integral part of his talking up the Minoan phenomenon for the European press and for western archaeological journals. The deposit was immediately described as cult paraphernalia from a temple treasury and believed to have been intentionally buried in the large cists after the destruction of this same building. Equally, considerable rhetoric was applied by Evans to connect the religious symbolism of these objects to visual and cult parallels from the Egyptian, Phoenician and classical Greek religions.

Faience

The fragmentary faience figurines which were a part of this collection are superb examples of the level of technological sophistication reached by Minoan craftsmen and duly came to represent Minoan artistic merit in a multitude of publications on ancient art, the largest figure taking pride of place in Evans' own publications of his excavations, *The Palace of Minos* in 1921. Yet they are exceptional on the basis of something of which I would hazard the general public is ignorant. Not for their

beauty or aesthetic quality, but rather, for their fabric. Faience is a form of early glass, although it is often mislabelled in literature as a glazed ceramic. But it bears no relation to ceramic, albeit for the shiny coating or glaze, which is also a form of vitreous material.

What makes the faience from the Temple Repositories so exceptional is the technology used in their construction. These figures are both physically complex, being constructed from moulded and jointed pieces which were state of the art technology for the late Middle Bronze Age. But in addition to this, they also represent one of history's earliest examples of polychrome vitreous material, as prior to this period no region of the eastern Mediterranean was producing anything more sophisticated than trichrome faience.

I am aware that when you look at images of these figures you see various shades of grey, brown, black and perhaps in a good light, green. However, the original colours are vastly altered by the passage of time since the second millennium and a recent examination of a faience plaque from the Repositories has established that the original faience colours for objects of this type consisted of red, purple, dark blue, pale yellow-green, creamy white and turquoise. This is another small contribution to the premise that 'what you see is not what you get' with these artefacts. Appearances in archaeology can be very deceptive, and this is without the inclusion of the possibility of famous historical excavators being fairly creative with their own restoration techniques.



Above: Faience plaque with suckling goats from the Temple Repositories; Below: faience plaque of cow with calf from the Temple Repositories. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, Crete.



The larger 'snake goddess' figurine from the Temple Repositories at the palace of Knossos. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, Crete.

The Faience Figurines

This brings us back to Arthur Evans and his team of restorers at the point of their discovery of two cists containing faience fragments. Of the many fragments from the Temple Repositories it was possible for two figures of the probable five or six original faience figurines to be restored. These two girdled and bare breasted figures were immediately assigned ritual significance by Evans and accordingly named by him, 'the Snake Goddess' or 'Mother Goddess', for the larger figure, and 'attendant, Votary or priestess', for the smaller figure. It is worth noting that he was, at least in the beginning, not responsible for the smaller figure bearing the epithet of 'Snake Goddess' and also that neither figure is actually the largest of the figurines, as that honour belongs to a fragment which was never restored.



Frontispiece to The Palace of Minos 1 showing the larger faience figure, Unshaded areas represent reconstructions.

Each of these faience figures was damaged and in very fragmentary condition. The larger figure only consisted of the head and torso (the knotted girdle was found in the West cist) and was immediately repaired by the artist Halvor Bagge, replacing the missing skirt with one made from copying another fragment of a skirt from an unrestored figure. Her right arm, neck, waist and headdress were also fragmentary and repaired. The snake head on her headdress was lost (assuming it was a snake head) and replaced. She was also missing the entire left forearm and part of a snake which were consequently reconstructed and replaced.

The second smaller faience figure which now outshines her larger sister in terms of media popularity was equally fragmentary.

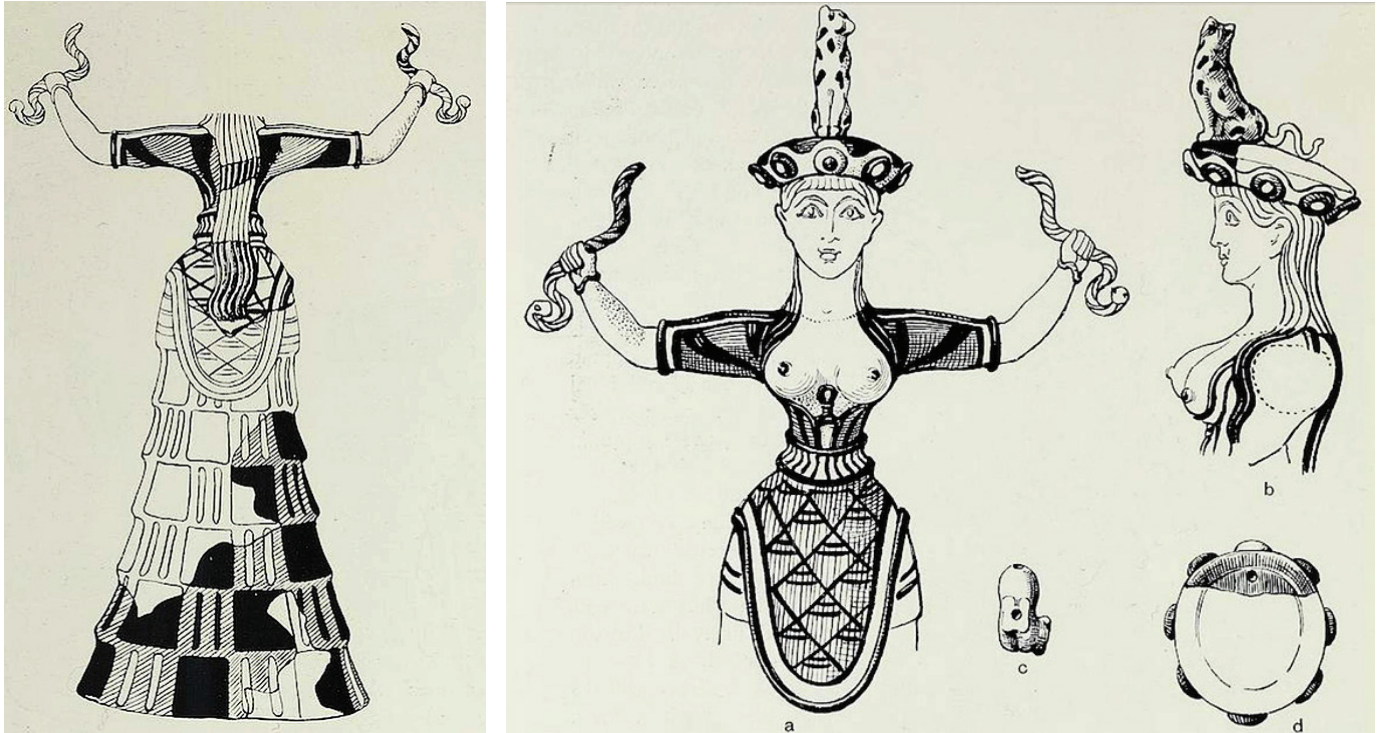
This 'votary' figure was missing her entire head, a large portion of the headdress, skirt and the left arm. Bagge replaced the missing head, the left arm and most of the headdress, also attaching a small feline figure upon the crown, when they concluded that it 'probably' belonged with the figure. Repairs were also made to the hair and parts of the skirt. In addition, in the hands of the little figure they placed writhing snakes where originally the extant right hand had held what may well have been a piece of twine.

Goddesses?

These faience figurines from the Temple Repository were interpreted by Evans himself as evidence for the Minoan cult of a universal mother goddess, somewhat



The smaller 'votive' faience figurine from the Temple Repositories at the palace of Knossos. Herakleion Archaeological Museum, Crete.



Two drawings by Halvor Bagge of the votive figure from the Temple Repositories. Un-shaded areas represent reconstructions. I would draw your attention to the segment of snake in the right hand of the figure. In the absence of a head, how can we positively identify this object as a snake? Credit: A. Evans 1921, *The Palace of Minos* 1.

under the influence of discoveries of 'fertility' figures from other European and Near Eastern sites, but also from the prevailing view of contemporary scholars such as James George Frazer and Jane Ellen Harrison who were at this time gleefully constructing an intellectual mythology for matriarchal society in prehistory (for an extended discussion of this topic see *Ancient Planet Vol. 3*).

However, Evans' vision of the ritual association of snakes with these artefacts unwisely inspired him to incorporate snakes where there were none originally indicated, and to arrange a collection of bones from the cist in the shape of a snake for a photograph (they were actually a weasel skull and fish bones). This particular mistake was hurriedly adjusted when the

error was realised, and the final black and white image of the repository artefacts shows no bones in the foreground.

The universal application of the epithet snake goddess for these figures is problematic as it assumes from the presence of a snake on the forearm and headdress of one figure (from six) that snakes were of particular significance to the Minoans over and above the evidence for other animal symbolism in this single assemblage from Knossos (flying fish, fish bones, 'cat' figurine, weasel skull, cattle and goat plaques, stag horns, and seals with sheep, goats, moufflon and cattle). I do not include the serpentine linings on the bodice in this discussion, as we have no evidence that they are not, in fact, components of the costume, like padded linings.

In addition, apart from the tenuous link with snakes, we have no empirical evidence that these figures are goddesses, or indeed aspects of a single goddess, rather than perhaps cult personnel or votive figures. It must be emphasised that male and female votive figures are an archaeologically established element of Minoan cult. Although it can be assumed that on the basis of the superior technology present in these artefacts they were most certainly objects of considerable value.

These two beautiful yet heavily restored glazed figurines have come to represent Minoan aesthetics and religion throughout our contemporary culture. In the early twentieth century they were reproduced in a multitude of publications and from this contributed to the next stage in the modern reception of Minoan art: the proliferation of 'goddess' figurines on the international antiquities market. For, as a result of the wide publicity and scholarly acclaim for this newly discovered Minoan civilisation, a number of fake snake goddess figurines and related artefacts became available to collectors, fortuitously being offered for sale to museums, so that they too could participate in the fashion for Aegean antiquities.

Fake Goddesses

As well as goddesses, a series of figurines of 'bull leapers' also surfaced in ivory which drew heavily on imagery from the restored Taureador fresco from Knossos. At least one of these figures was purchased by Evans himself on the assumption that it was genuine. Apparently he was quite receptive to the idea that members of his team were capable of stealing from his

site, but not to the solution that forgeries might be occurring. The 'Boy God' figure was illustrated by Emile Gilliéron fils in a pose with an unprovenanced goddess and published by Evans in the third edition of *The Palace of Minos* accompanied by much zealous discussion of the stylistic parallels for each.

Conservatively, there are at least fourteen Minoan snake goddess figurines of questionable origin known to be in the possession of museums and private collections today. (This is not taking into account those objects which may have been sold discretely). Of these figurines, the most renowned are the ivory and gold 'Boston Goddess', purchased by the Boston Museum in the United States and the marble 'Fitzwilliam Goddess' held by the Fitzwilliam Museum in England. There is also an acknowledged forgery in the Cambridge Museum of Classical Archaeology which was bought in 1928 predominantly with the intention of verifying the authenticity of the Fitzwilliam figurine.

These figures conform to ideals established by the legitimate figurines, for regardless of medium they are represented in the accepted fashion for Minoan 'goddesses': they are bare breasted and dressed in tightly waisted full length skirts with varying headdresses. The Boston Goddess grasps snakes in her hands, twined up her forearms like the larger figure from Knossos. The other figures hold their hands in gestures reminiscent of votive bronzes from Crete. Many figures, however, do not completely adhere to acknowledged Minoan visual conventions, no doubt reflecting ignorance of some features of Minoan design by the forgers.



Disputed: There was some question about the authenticity of this so-called Statuette of a Snake Goddess, so the Boston Museum of Fine Arts lists it as dating either to about 1600-1500 BC or the early 20th century. Credit: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Modern forgery: Chryselephantine figure of 'a goddess or priestess' ivory and gold leaf, Walters Art Museum (provenance unknown). Credit: Wiki Commons.



Authentic: Bronze votive figurine of a 'female worshipper', or young woman making a gesture of piety from Crete, Late Minoan I, ca. 1625-1450 BCE. Cleveland Museum of Art. Credit: Wiki Commons.

The difficulties that hinder the authentication of these spurious figures are their lack of secure archaeological provenience and the inconclusiveness of modern scientific analysis techniques. This last can be due in part to early museum curation techniques, such as restoration and cleaning and also to excessive handling. But it is also exacerbated by the calculated reuse of ancient materials by forgers in the construction of their forgeries. As a result it has been possible for some of these figurines to be repudiated as modern forgeries, but in the case of others, both academia and the museums are placed in limbo, as scientific analysis is inconclusive.

In the past the evidence for their authenticity rested with the opinion of

Minoan scholars such as that of Sir Arthur Evans. Prior to the use of scientific analysis, objects without provenance could only be authenticated and dated through a consensus of academic opinion based on art history criticism and on object typologies. In the early twentieth century Arthur Evans was considered the expert par excellence on Aegean antiquities, due naturally to his extensive work excavating Knossos. In the case of both the Boston and Fitzwilliam figures it was Evans himself who publicly endorsed them as genuine, even going so far as to draw comparisons between them and the legitimate figures from Knossos.

But this is where it gets trickier, as the same people that were involved in the excavation and restoration of the antiquities



*Male bronze votive figure, one of many that are believed to have been left as offerings at Minoan cult sites. Neopalatial Period, ca. 1700-1450 BCE.
Credit: British Museum.*

from Knossos were also involved in the restoration, sale, or history of many Minoan figurines circulating on the antiquities market at that time. If one excludes Evans himself, the responsibility must lie with the people Evans employed and trained, particularly the Gilliérons, who conveniently ran their own business selling high quality reproductions to collectors. But they were not alone, as Halvor Bagge also made a tidy penny in the off season reproducing Minoan artefacts for ardent collectors. This does not just place the authenticity of the spurious figures in doubt, but also places doubt upon the integrity of the restorations at Knossos and upon Arthur Evans himself.

With his position of authority on this genre and his relationship with many renowned museums due to his own connection with the Ashmolean, Evans was in the enviable position of being able to create the persona of ancient Minoan society on the basis of a minimum of legitimate, archaeologically sound Minoan material. This was ably supported by the enthusiastic production of forgeries and souvenirs being carried out in the off seasons by his employees and the readiness of museums at that time to purchase figurines without verifiable histories in order to enhance their collections of Aegean antiquities.

The fictionalisation of the Minoan past is a product of the literary outpourings of Arthur Evans, the fanciful reconstructions of his restorers and the material output of the Gilliérons, with the able cooperation of early twentieth century scholars and museums. The evidence against the Gilliérons is particularly damning, as they are known to have been involved with several clandestine transactions. They were involved with the

sales of both the Boston and Fitzwilliam goddesses and they, or an associate, were likely the subject of Sir Leonard Woolley's anecdote in his memoirs referring to a forgery workshop in the 1920's on Crete.

Knossos

But exactly where does fact end and fabrication begin? After the First World War Arthur Evans and his team, concerned over erosion to the site, set out to protect the exposed archaeological remains at Knossos through extensive restorations. To achieve this end they used what another colleague of mine humorously coined as 'Evans' cement mixer of doom'. These restorations, employing the aforementioned abundance of concrete, are also extensive fabrications again based on Evans' vision of an idealised Minoan society. They too are no longer considered in academic circles as accurate reconstructions of Minoan architecture. However, one hundred years later they are themselves archaeology and constitute historical monuments in their own right.

One can then add to this debacle the fact that the gorgeous but very creative early twentieth century reconstructions by the Gilliérons, Bagge and Piet de Jong are to this day liable to be employed in media articles that discuss legitimate Minoan archaeology, through no fault of the original research, but rather through the ready access to beautiful stock images in media such as Wikimedia Commons. And I think it is worth emphasising that even at this moment when you think of the 'Prince of Lilies' fresco you may actually be thinking of an Evans and co. reconstruction, or, in fact, a lovely but inaccurate painting by Piet de Jong, rather than the very piecemeal original fresco



This is an early twentieth century painting by Piet de Jong which Evans coined the 'Prince of Lilies' and it is not the original fresco. The fresco itself may be fragments of more than one figure, the subject and gender/genders of which are still open to debate within Aegean archaeology.

Credit: Wiki Commons.

which may, in fact, be remnants of more than one figure.

In the international sphere, Evans endorsed a quantity of Minoan material which while supporting his personal convictions of the Minoan past, bore only passing reference to archaeological fact. Yet this vision has served to lay an enduring foundation for modern conceptions of Minoan culture. It cannot be contested that Arthur Evans was successful in engaging the public's attention and imagination and thus facilitating the flow of international support for Aegean archaeology. But this same public profile in turn stimulated demand for artefacts from collectors and museums and thus fuelled the market in illegal or fabricated antiquities. In addition, this volume of inaccurate reconstructions and forgeries has perpetuated fantasies about the nature of Minoan culture which are in truth embedded in Victorian and early twentieth century romantic ideals and not in archaeological fact.

Arthur Evans' reconstructions of Knossos and his subjective assumptions for artefacts, such as 'Snake Goddess' and 'Mother Goddess' for the faience figurines has engendered an particularly enduring image of Minoan culture and belief in contemporary society. I do not deny the vast quantities of valuable data and artefacts that Arthur Evans and his excavations have bequeathed to Aegean archaeology, but I do, however, resent that his academic conclusions, which were predominantly a product of his generation, still insidiously pervade modern thought. This artificial construction of Minoan culture is a burden on archaeology which may only be dispelled from the public consciousness through further research, equally through

publications which employ images of the original artefacts, and finally perhaps through the passage of time.

Further Reading

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